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Curcumin and Your Health

Curcumin certainly has the health experts excited. I understand, but I also think there are some things that you have to know about this phytonutrient before you begin taking mega-doses every day.

Absorption and Bioavailability

Curcumin is not well absorbed in the digestive system—in fact, it's very poorly absorbed, with some studies showing that no measurable curcuminoids reach the bloodstream at all. That's why a focus of research has been to get the active part of turmeric into a better delivery system. I mentioned combining it with piperine, a component of black pepper, on [Tuesday](#) (1). Researchers have used everything from lipid delivery systems, intravenous drips, to nanoparticles to see if absorption can be increased. Some work. Some don't.



I understand why they're doing it. The only problem is that we are bypassing one of the mechanisms the body put in place to protect itself: the gut. That could be good or that could be not so good. When researchers are trying to help curcumin absorption to treat diseases, that's one thing. But when we try to increase curcumin (or any phytonutrient) to levels that exceed what we might get from using turmeric as a spice, we just don't know the long-term effects. I'm not saying that there are any negative effects; we just don't know.

But here's something that's interesting. In spite of the low absorption and bioavailability, curcumin still provides health benefits (2). Conditions from heart disease to digestive disorders benefit from the use of curcumin. In my mind, that's the difference between foods and supplements versus medications: you're not treating diseases so much as you're trying to prevent them. That's an important difference.

Cautions

The concern with herbs is that they can have unintended consequences. While the absorption of curcumin is low, that doesn't mean it doesn't have any effect in the digestive system. It can impact some of the metabolism of medications because it affects the CYP P450 enzymes that are responsible for the absorption and elimination of medications. It doesn't affect all medications, but one class of drugs it seems to impact is blood thinners such as warfarin. Keep that in mind if you're on blood thinners.

Remember the piperine from Tuesday's message? It does increase the absorption of curcumin. It also may negatively impact the efficacy of curcumin as it relates to diabetes (3). Rats with diabetes benefitted when both were given independently but when combined, the beneficial effects were negatively impacted. One study on rodents does not mean it will happen in humans; it's just something to consider if you decide to supplement with turmeric.

The Bottom Line

Can you use turmeric and thus, curcumin for its potential health benefits? Yes, in cooking and as a supplement. Think of it this way. When you use turmeric or any spice in cooking, you get the most natural absorption. While it might not be high, it must be effective or we wouldn't know how beneficial it is. When you put it in supplements, you concentrate it, which will help absorption as well. One thing that seems to naturally increase absorption is to have some fat in the meal when you cook with turmeric or take turmeric supplements.

The typical amounts of turmeric would be two teaspoons if you're using it to cook a typical recipe that serves four. That would approximate the 250 – 500 mg of curcumin you would get in a supplement, although amounts in food would vary. To me, I'd rather take levels that would be found in nature and let the body do what it will do. As I said, that's how they found the benefits to begin with.

If you want a good overview of nutrients, especially the role of herbs in health, check out my audio download [Vitamins, Minerals, Herbs, and Other Supplements](#).

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

References:

1. Planta Med. 1998 May;64(4):353-6.
2. Mol Pharm. 2007 Nov-Dec;4(6):807-18.
3. PLoS One. 2014 Dec 3;9(12):e113993.

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